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RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 9266
RUEHB/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 6489
RUEHC/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 3620
RUEHGE/AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN 0730
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 3882
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RUEHM/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 5499
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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 001189

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL ASEC BL

SUBJECT: BOLIVIA: VIOLENCE, GOB UNABLE TO MAINTAIN ORDER IN SUCRE

REF: LA PAZ 1168

Classified By: EcoPol Chief Mike Hammer reasons 1.4b,d

¶1. (C) Summary: On May 24 Bolivia's constitutional capital of Sucre again erupted into violence leaving dozens wounded as residents opposed a planned visit by President Evo Morales. Despite the initial presence of police, military and pro-government social groups, Evo was forced to cancel his visit. Some observers question whether Evo and his ruling Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party are losing control of the country, and in an unusual move, the central government has threatened to complain to the United Nations and other international organizations about the actions of its own citizens. End Summary.

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Military and Police Evicted
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¶2. (C) Preparations for Evo's visit to Sucre resembled the MAS's encircling of the Constitutional Assembly in 2007, when rings of security (pro-MAS social organizations on the outside, police and military on the inside) protected a military school just outside of Sucre. This time, however, the pro-MAS social groups broke ranks in the face of violent Sucre mobs. University students and city residents forced the military to retreat ignominiously under the flag of the department (state) of Chuquisaca. Despite earlier MAS rhetoric calling for the military to live up to its honor, the soldiers did not fire on the protesters, leaving them little recourse but to retreat when confronted by rock-throwing mobs. Military and police infighting continued, as Armed Forces Commander General Luis Trigo blamed the police for leaving the military alone in front of the mobs.

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Accusations of Racism
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¶3. (C) The Ministry of Justice, military leaders and other central government officials have described the Sucre

violence as racist. In an ugly incident, a group of young Sucre city-dwellers surrounded pro-government indigenous supporters and forced them to kneel, shirtless, in a main plaza. The Sucre opposition civic committee denied that its members were involved in this highly-publicized event and also apologized for the incident. (Comment: The government's description of the violence as racist is complicated by the fact that the city-dwellers who attacked the pro-government campesinos often appeared to be indigenous themselves.

Although there are clearly demographic differences between some of the more-white opposition departments and the almost-entirely indigenous or "campesino" MAS support, the lines are blurred in a country where the majority of citizens are either mestizo or indigenous. End comment.)

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Evo Losing Control?
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¶4. (C) Press and other observers are now questioning whether Evo and the central government are losing control of parts of the country, citing an incident on May 24 when Presidency Minister Juan Quintana was not able to visit Riberalta (in opposition-controlled Pando) and protests against a vice-presidential visit to Pando a week earlier. On April 5 Evo was unable to visit Tarija because of threats of confrontations if he participated in the anniversary of that department. In recent weeks Evo's trip to Santa Cruz was limited to his own hotel and MAS-controlled areas, and on a visit to Beni Evo was forced to take shelter in the headquarters of a campesino organization. There are reports

that Evo has decided to forgo upcoming official acts in Sucre and the four main opposition-led departments of Tarija, Beni, Pando, Santa Cruz. (Note: A representative at the hotel where Evo had been scheduled to stay in Sucre told Emboff that Evo would no longer be welcome at that hotel for security reasons, confiding in an aside that Evo is also no longer welcome in the city. End note.)

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More Conflict Ahead
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¶5. (C) In reaction to the anti-Evo violence, pro-MAS campesinos in Chuquisaca are now threatening to take university campuses in the countryside and cut the water supply. Cocaleros from the neighboring department of Cochabamba are threatening to march on Sucre in support of Evo. Meanwhile, the upcoming autonomy referenda in the northern departments of Pando and Beni are expected to be accompanied by violence. Certain Pando civic groups are encouraging Pando citizens not to vote. Pando Prefect Leopoldo Fernandez explained that his departmental government would not take further action until after the autonomy referendum in Tarija. (Note: The Tarija autonomy referendum is expected to be less contentious and less violent than that of Pando, although pro-MAS groups have announced that they will not permit ballot boxes in Tarija's campesino communities and have accused Tarija Prefect Mario Cossio of corruption and misuse of departmental funds. End note.)

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Comment
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¶6. (C) Both the MAS and Sucre/opposition leaders are blaming the other side for the violence in Sucre. There is enough blame to go around, as leaders of both sides have been inciting their followers to confrontation. The fact that the military allowed itself to be run out of town suggests that there is strong institutional resistance to firing on fellow citizens, possibly a result of October 2003 violence. However, General Trigo's muddled statement that "if we take action as the Armed Forces, we will ensure that we are respected again as soldiers and as a country" raises questions as to whether the military is gearing up for more forceful reaction to future "humiliations."

¶7. (C) Minister of Government Alfredo Rada admitted publicly that there had been warnings about the inadvisability of a presidential visit to Sucre and "maybe we should have been more precise in calculating the risks." This miscalculation amounts to a serious loss of face for President Evo Morales, who is now seen as unable to visit parts of his own country. Foreign Minister Choquehuanca's declaration that the central government would send reports on the Sucre violence to international organizations for their comment is a clear sign of MAS weakness. Thus far attempts at distraction by pulling the Yankee "empire" into the fray have been limited: on May 19 Evo reiterated old accusations of the empire's "conspiracy" while warning that his patience was nearing an end (reftel), and more recently a MAS city-councilman in Santa Cruz alleged the presence of "a group led and monitored by the North-American empire" in Santa Cruz. However, as Evo faces more opposition and potentially more loss of control, we anticipate that the Embassy and the USG will again be blamed in an attempt to use anti-American sentiment to avoid anti-Evo actions. End summary.

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